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SUBJECT: MEDVEDEV ASKS RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO HELP RUSSIA'S YOUTH

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11. (SBU) Summary: On March 11, Medvedev convened a joint meeting of the State Council and the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations in Tula, focusing on the moral development and civic education of Russia's youth. Medvedev, coordinating the meeting himself, asked the heads of Russia's major religions to help Russia's youth adjust to the current crisis environment while aiding the government in its fight against extremism. Seen by some journalists as a personal appeal, Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Patriarch Kirill accepted the offer for an increased ROC role, pledging to help provide social calm, empowering youth to realize their own goals, and denouncing violence and intolerance. Protestant leaders echoed Medvedev's and Kirill's call for greater focus on morality in 2009, Russia's "Year of Youth." Religion experts, however, hesitated to believe that Kirill and the ROC, although growing in power, could make a major difference in fighting Russia's current social problems. End Summary.

Medvedev Solicits Help from Religious Leaders

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12. (SBU) At the March 11 joint meeting of the State Council and the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations in Tula, Medvedev greeted leaders of Russia's four constitutionally-recognized religions in Russia (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism) in order to "develop a common approach to solving the most difficult problems" currently facing Russia's youth. Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) head Patriarch Kirill, Chief Mufti of Russia Ravil Gaynutdin, Chief Rabbi of Russia Beryl Lazar, and Chairman of the Buddhist community Khambo-Lama Damba Ayusheyev represented Russia's leading religious groups, and were joined by Chairman of the Protestant Union Sergei Ryakhovskiy and President of the Western-Russian Union of Seventh Day Adventists Vassiliy Stolyar. Minister of Education and Science Andrei Furzenko and Ministry of Internal Affairs head Rashid Nugaliyev -- two leaders positioned to influence the future of Russia's youth -- also attended the meeting. It was the first time that the Russian President, and not his Chief of Staff, coordinated the meeting, suggesting a closer relationship currently between the government and the ROC, according to Kommersant. (Note: the last such meeting occurred in 2004 under Putin, for whom the Council was not a high priority)

13. (SBU) Medvedev outlined three major tasks regarding youth issues in the coming year, according to ITAR-TASS. The number one achievement, according to Medvedev, would be the creation of conditions enabling Russian youth to achieve their goals through artistic, innovative activities -- a sphere in which Russian religious groups could play a vital role. Medvedev appealed to religious leaders to help Russian

youth "adapt to life in crisis conditions" and to help the government "battle the growth of extremism" in the country. While Medvedev included all religious leaders in his comments, journalists from Russian daily *Kommersant* attributed Medvedev's comments as a personal plea to Patriarch Kirill, a sign of his growing political importance. Kirill responded by offering to "help people remain calm" and "oppose divisions in society" that could arise as a result of the current crisis, while saying that the ROC would not "stand to one side."

#### Medvedev, Kirill Push Youth Empowerment

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**¶4.** (SBU) In a discussion with Duma deputies from the Tula region, Medvedev said that Russia's most important task in 2009, the "Year of Youth," was to develop the social infrastructure in Russia's villages. Medvedev underlined the need for a coordinated campaign to stop extremist action and propaganda while drawing youth to intercultural dialogue and cooperation. As the uncertainties of Russia's economic future rise, Medvedev called on religious organizations to prevent the proliferation of pessimism and depression among youth as "one of our shared priorities." While acknowledging in Tula that the current economic crisis has erased many of Russia's improving employment opportunities and undermined the well-being of Russia's youth, Medvedev challenged the same demographic to believe in the Russian government and have faith in themselves. He blamed the moral vacuum of the Soviet era and the destructive ideas of intolerance, espoused by "pseudo-religious groups," for leading Russia's youth down the path of drunkenness and drug abuse, and also cautioned against the possible deleterious influence of mass media in the country.

#### Kirill Makes First Substantive Policy Statement

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**¶5.** (SBU) Addressing his fellow religious leaders at the Tula conference as "Brothers and Sisters," Patriarch Kirill took the spotlight in Medvedev's plea for greater Church-State cooperation on youth issues. Kirill advocated for the empowerment of Russia's youth as the best way to fight extremism, and reminded youth that pogroms, violence, and extremist propaganda will not solve any of Russia's problems.

Joined at the meeting by fellow Orthodox leaders Metropolitan Klement and Metropolitan Juvenaly, Kirill proposed the inclusion of national patriotic and social work projects for Russian youth education in addition to conferences and roundtables. In connection with the current economic and social problems, Kirill also believed that the Russian government should facilitate the adjustment of migrants entering the country by teaching them Russian, involving them in social life, and exposing them to Russian culture and traditions -- thereby supporting Medvedev's message of tolerance. *Kommersant* journalists subsequently reprinted pre-election predictions made by supporters of Metropolitan Klement, forecasting Kirill's emergence as a political tool of the Kremlin. ROC Deputy head of External Relations Vsevolod Chaplin quickly dismissed such claims on March 12 in an *Interfax* press conference, yet candidly admitted that some "very influential believers" in Orthodoxy can indeed have an impact on the political situation in Russia.

#### Protestants Also On Board

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**¶6.** (SBU) On March 17, Ambassador Beyrle attended the Ninth Annual Russian National Prayer Breakfast, chaired by Russian Baptist Union head of External Relations Vitaly Vlasenko. Over 250 clergy and laypeople, predominately Christians that previously expressed support for Kirill's election (Ref A), attended the conference at Moscow's President Hotel. Ambassador Beyrle joined numerous other guests ) the heads of various Protestant and Jewish communities, Russian government organizations, and Russian Duma members ) in giving remarks to guests. Religious leaders focused their

comments on improving the moral upbringing and opportunities for Russia's youth, a popular theme considering that the GOR proclaimed 2009 as the "Year of Youth." Russian Baptist Union Director Yuriy Sipko blamed the current moral decline in Russia not on the youth, but on the parents of today's youth who had lost their moral compass.

Experts Cynical about Medvedev's Offer

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**¶7. (SBU)** Experts varied in their assessments of the importance of Medvedev's comments. Forum 18 religion journalist Geraldine Fagan told us on March 18 that Medvedev's appeal to religious leaders shows recognition of the GOR's inability to encourage youth towards the right path. She acknowledged that Kirill's influence in the government continued to grow, but doubted that he would be able to convince Russian youth to devote themselves to the ROC en masse. SOVA Center Director Aleksandr Verkhovskiy told us on March 13 that the ROC stood little chance in deterring xenophobic or extremist activity, placing the lion's share of the blame on past government indifference and deep Russian historical roots, which could not be erased overnight (Ref B). Public Chamber member and director of the Tsaritsino education center Yefim Rachevskiy told Center TV on March 16 that Kirill's push for instruction of Orthodox culture and traditions in Russian public schools would simply overburden students with an additional subject, and he spoke out against one religion claiming the upbringing of Russia's youth as "their own exclusive zone of responsibility." Rachevskiy's comments came days after the March 12 press statement by Acting President of the Russian Academy of Education David Feldshtain, who told ITAR-TASS that courses on the foundations of religious culture would not be required in Russia, but optional instead.

Comment

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**¶8. (SBU)** Nervous about the possibility of social unrest during the economic crisis, Medvedev appealed to Patriarch Kirill and his religious colleagues not as a last option, but as the most wholesome one. Battling extremism will require increased government funding and police patrols in the short term, but demands an overhaul in Russia's approach to promoting tolerance in the long term. Kirill's advocacy for greater cooperation among different faiths serves as a great starting point, but will be meaningless if the government

does nothing to encourage it.

BEYRLE